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Responses to Information Requests

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29 September 2020

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Iraq: Security situation in Erbil [Arbil, Irbil], including activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) [Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Daesh] (2017–September 2020)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

1. Overview

According to an October 2017 report assessing locations of return by the UN's International Organization for Migration's (IOM) mission in Iraq, the Erbil governorate had a "stable security situation" (UN Oct. 2017, 13). A 2019 country guidance and analysis report by the EU's European Asylum Support Office (EASO) states that "[i]n general, conflict severity remained low in the governorate of Erbil" (EU June 2019, 112). In a 2020 report, Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) indicates that while the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is "generally regarded as a more benign security environment, its borders are insecure" (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 2.58).

1.1 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Returnees

Sources indicate that Erbil hosts a large portion of Iraq's IDP population (EU June 2019, 112; UN Oct. 2017, 13). A March 2020 report by the IOM indicates that out of a total IDP population of 2,045,718, there were 222,738 IDPs in Erbil as of May 2018; out of a total IDP population of 1,607,148, there were 209,784 IDPs in Erbil as of June 2019 (UN 30 Mar. 2020, 17). The October 2017 IOM report indicates that out of 312,276 IDPs in Erbil in 2017, over 90 percent came from Ninewa and Anbar governorates and an estimated 80 percent resettled in the district of Erbil (UN Oct. 2017, 13). The same report indicates that over 80 percent of IDPs settled in Erbil are Arab Sunnis and 20 percent were other minorities, including Chaldean and Syriac Christians, Kurdish Sunnis, Yazidis, Turkmen and Shabak Shias (UN Oct. 2017, 14).

The March 2020 IOM report indicates that there was a 5 percent increase in residents returning to Erbil between May 2018 and June 2019, with 39,006 returnees in May 2018, and 41,070 in June 2019, and that the pace of return compared to the period between May 2017 and May 2018, when it recorded a 14 percent increase, was "greatly slowed" (UN 30 Mar. 2020, 12). Based on a survey of 712,022 returnee households and 171,699 IDP households covering 3,645 locations across Iraq, the same report indicates that 13 percent of returnees living in Erbil were "concerned about [the] resurgence of ISIL" (UN 30 Mar. 2020, 9, 38).

The October 2017 IOM report states that in Erbil the "majority of IDPs (65%) and all returnees are only allowed freedom of movement with a special permit from the police" (UN Oct. 2017, 14–15). A survey of 5,142 respondents in IDP camps in 17 governorates conducted from 28 June to 19 July 2020 by 11 organizations making up the National Protection Cluster (NPC), including the UNHCR and IOM, reports that, among respondents in IDP camps in Erbil, 60 percent reported a ban on entry and exit from camps due to COVID-19 regulations and 37 percent reported a ban on new admissions to camps (NPC 31 July 2020, 1). The same survey found that 17 percent of respondents in camps in Erbil reported that COVID-19 measures "apply solely or more strictly to IDPs and/or returnees" (UN, et al. 31 July 2020, 1).

Sources report that there has been internal displacement from the district of Makhmour [Makhmur; Makmuhr] (EU June 2019, 112; UN Oct. 2017, 13). Sources indicate that Makhmour is a "disputed" area claimed by both the federal government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (Al-Monitor 13 May 2020; Kurdistan 24 21 Dec. 2019; Rudaw 18 Apr. 2019), located 60 kilometers southwest of Erbil (Kurdistan 24 21 Dec. 2019). According to Lifos, the country of origin information institution of the Swedish Migration Agency (Sweden 26 Oct. 2017), while Makhmour has been "continuously" part of the Erbil governorate since 1932, it has been administered by the Ninewa governorate since 1991 and is "generally considered outside" of the districts administered by the KRG; since there has been no official transfer of administration of Makhmour district from Erbil to Ninewa, it has an "uncertain status" and continues to be "among the least developed districts in Iraq" (Sweden 4 June 2018, 4).

2. Security Incidents

Sources indicate that "[s]ecurity incidents are not recurrent in Erbil" (UN Oct. 2017, 14) or that "high-profile assaults are rare in Erbil" (Reuters 22 July 2018). According to 2019 conflict and fatality statistics compiled by the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) [1], based on data on "[e]xplosions/[r]emote violence," protests, battles, riots, violence against civilians and "[s]trategic developments" collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) [2], Erbil governorate recorded 410 incidents, killing 447 [3] individuals, occurring in the districts of Alanah, Barzan, Choman, Erbil, Hajj Umran, Halgurd Mountain, Jabal Biradawst, Kasnazan, Layl Kan, Makhmour, Mergasur, Qaraj, Qasray, Shaweys, Sidakan, Silsilat Jibal Qandil, Similan, Soran and Wadi Khakurik (Austrian Red Cross 23 June 2020a, 2, 5). A report on incidents and fatalities for the first quarter of 2020 by ACCORD based on ACLED data states that 94 incidents were recorded in Erbil, killing 55 people, occurring in the districts of Choman, Erbil, Jabal Biradawst, Koisnjaq, Lolan, Makhmour, Mergasur, Qaraj, Ruala, Sidakan, Silsilat Jibal Qandil and Wadi Khakurik (Austrian Red Cross 23 June 2020b, 4).

Based on data of "documented" "violent deaths of civilians (non-combatants)" collected and presented by Iraq Body Count (IBC) [4] in coordination with EASO, there were a total of 15 incidents, resulting in 26 deaths, in 2018 and 10 incidents, resulting in 16 deaths, in 2017 (EU and IBC Feb. 2019, 6, 9, 21). The same report indicates the following breakdown by district in 2018: 6 incidents took place in Erbil, 4 in Soran, 3 in Koisnjaq and 1 incident each in Makhmour and Mergasur; in 2017, 3 incidents took place in Erbil district, 2 in Soran and 1 incident each in Makhmour and Choman (EU and IBC Feb. 2019, 21). The same report provides the following table summarizing the types of incidents that were recorded:

Erbil	All types	IED [Improvised Explosive Device]	Suicide Attack	Air attack	Shelling	Gunfire	Executions	Other
2012	10	0	0	0	0	5 (50.0%)	0	5 (50.0%)
2017	10	0	0	3 (30.0%)	0	3 (30.0%)	3 (30.0%)	1 (10.0%)
2018	15	3 (20.0%)	0	1 (6.7%)	1 (6.7%)	6 (40.0%)	2 (13.3%)	2 (13.3%)

(EU and IBC Feb. 2019, 21)

Sources indicate that Turkish forces have launched airstrikes against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), [an "armed group" considered a "terrorist organization by Turkey and its Western allies" (Rudaw 15 Apr. 2020)], including PKK locations in Erbil (UN 22 Nov. 2019, para. 35; Rudaw 15 Apr. 2020; GardaWorld 20 June 2020). Sources indicate that three civilians were killed in April 2020 by a Turkish airstrike near a refugee camp in Makhmour district (Rudaw 15 Apr. 2020; *The Jerusalem Post* 15 Apr. 2020).

Sources indicate that a gunman [or gunmen (Al Jazeera 17 July 2019)] killed a Turkish diplomat and another person in an Erbil restaurant in July 2019 (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 2.58; Al Jazeera 17 July 2019; *The Guardian* 17 July 2019). Australia's DFAT reports that the case "remains unsolved" (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 2.58). However, Al Jazeera cites Kurdish authorities as indicating that the "main suspect" in the killing was arrested less than a week after the attack (Al Jazeera 20 July 2019).

2.1 ISIS

The UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's travel advisory for Iraq states that while the KRI has a "different security environment to the rest of Iraq, there remains a risk of attacks by Da'esh" (UK 27 Aug. 2020). The EASO country guidance report indicates that "[l]imited presence of ISIL were reported in Erbil, in particular in Makhmour district" (EU June 2019, 111).

Sources report that ISIS fighters are regrouping in the mountains [or near Qara Chokh [Qarachokh, Qarachogh] mountain (*The National* 10 Dec. 2019)] near Makhmour (US 24 Feb. 2020; *The National* 10 Dec. 2019; Rudaw 18 Apr. 2019). The *National*, an English-language newspaper based in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that focuses on news in the Middle East (*The National* n.d.), indicates that a Peshmerga [5] commander working on Qara Chokh mountain estimates that 250 ISIS fighters are in the mountains, while a US commander training the Peshmerga estimates the number is closer to 100 (*The National* 10 Dec. 2019). Rudaw, an Erbil-based media network focusing on news in Kurdistan and the Middle East (Rudaw n.d.), cites a shepherd in Makhmour as estimating that there were 50 to 150 ISIS fighters and their families residing in caves and ravines around Makhmour, along with "their support networks among the population" (Rudaw 18 Apr. 2019). EASO cites January 2019 correspondence with the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), a US-based non-profit policy research organization aiming to advance "an informed understanding of military affairs" (ISW n.d.), as indicating that ISIS "'exerts a high level of physical and psychological pressure over the population'" in Makhmour (EU Mar. 2019, 155). ISW further stated to EASO that while ISIS "cannot hold terrain," it does "contest control" with Iraqi security forces, which is demonstrated in the "abandonment of villages, destruction of agriculture and infrastructure, repeat raids, and assassination[s] targeting the local social hierarchy" (EU Mar.

2019, 155). Media sources report that ISIS demanded taxes from farmers and burnt farmland in the Ali Rash village of the Makhmour district in May 2019 (Rudaw 14 May 2019; Kurdistan 24 14 May 2019).

Media sources cite Kurdistan authorities as indicating that [three (Kurdistan 24 3 Aug. 2018; Al-Monitor 25 July 2018)] gunmen aligned with ISIS carried out an attack on a government building in Erbil in July 2018, killing one government worker and injuring members of security forces (Reuters 22 July 2018; Kurdistan 24 3 Aug. 2018; Al-Monitor 25 July 2018). Sources report that Kurdish security forces killed the attackers (Kurdistan 24 3 Aug. 2018; Reuters 22 July 2018). Al-Monitor, an online news publication focusing on the Middle East and North Africa (Al-Monitor n.d.), quotes the Erbil governor in an interview with Voice of America (VOA) as stating that "[i]t is true that Daesh is not organized in Kurdistan and has no armed men," "but the three men who attacked the provincial building in Erbil proved that Daesh still exists ideologically [in Kurdistan]" (Al-Monitor 25 July 2018, square brackets in original).

3. Crime Situation

Australia's DFAT indicates that in the KRI, "[v]iolent crime is common, and kidnappings, murders and robberies occur frequently" (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 2.58). Media sources cite a survey by the Independent Commission for Human Rights in Iraqi Kurdistan as indicating that there were 377 deaths by murder or suicide between 1 June 2016 and 30 June 2017, [mostly by firearms (Al-Monitor 6 Mar. 2019)], and that there is easy access to guns in the KRI (Al-Monitor 6 Mar. 2019; Niqash [July 2017]). The US *Iraq 2020 Crime & Safety Report* cites Kurdish officials as indicating that the declining economy in the KRI has "resulted in a moderate increase in crime"; however, the same report states that crime statistics and "crime reporting mechanisms" in the KRI are "unreliable" (US 12 May 2020). The same source further indicates that Kurdish officials "[i]nformally" commented that "property thefts and thefts from residences had risen in the past several years" and "drug use and cross border trafficking are becoming a more serious concern" (US 12 May 2020). Media sources cite the Erbil chief of police, as indicating in 2019 that 53 suspects had been arrested for various crimes, including seven individuals charged with murder and others with theft (Kurdistan 24 23 July 2019; Shafaaq 23 July 2019).

4. State Response

Sources indicate that the Asayish is the KRG's security service (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 5.16; US 11 Mar. 2020, 2), responsible for "counterterrorism, counter-espionage, gathering intelligence, assessing security threats, and countering smuggling, economic and political crimes and sabotage" (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 5.16). The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019* states that the two main Kurdish political parties, the

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) maintained separate Asayish and Peshmerga forces (US 11 Mar. 2020, 2). Sources report that the Asayish acts with "impunity" and Peshmerga and Asayish committed human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 5.16, 5.18; US 11 Mar. 2020, 3, 5, 13). An opinion piece by Yerevan Saeed, a research associate at the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) [6], published by Al Jazeera, states that the Kurdish security forces are "weakened" by partisan division and the "formal" government institutions and police are "powerless" against "politically[-]connected individuals who act outside of the law" (Saeed 1 Mar. 2020). An opinion piece by Dana Taib Menmy, a KRI-based freelance journalist, published in Middle East Eye (MEE), an online news publication focusing on the Middle East (MEE n.d.), indicates that the KDP and PUK are "ready to use" security forces under their respective partisan command for "settling internal conflicts and cracking down on opposition activists and demonstrators" (Menmy 7 Aug. 2020). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The US Department of State's *Iraq 2020 Crime & Safety Report* indicates that KRI police and military units can respond quickly to security incidents, terrorist attacks, and criminal activities. [KRI] police and security services have sufficient training and command and control to direct their officers where required, and have modern weapons and security equipment. Specialized units, such as tactical response and explosive ordinance disposal teams, have enhanced training and equipment. (US 12 May 2020)

The same source further states that the KRG "devotes considerable resources to protect its key government buildings, vital infrastructure, the diplomatic community, and soft targets such as hotels, churches, mosques, and shopping areas" (US 12 May 2020).

Australia's DFAT states that the Peshmerga is "generally viewed as a highly competent military force" (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 5.17). The US *Iraq 2020 Crime & Safety Report* indicates that the "heavy presence of the Peshmerga on Kurdish defensive lines have been a stabilizing force," especially when working with Coalition air power and US assistance and "[t]his combination has undoubtedly prevented significant acts of terrorism in Erbil and other major urba[n] areas" in the KRI (US 12 May 2020).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

Notes

[1] The Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) is a department of the Austrian Red Cross, "providing information on countries of origin of asylum seekers (COI) in order to contribute to fair and efficient asylum procedures" (ecoi.net 22 Jan. 2020).

[2] The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) is a US-based non-profit organization that "collects the dates, actors, locations, fatalities, and types of all reported political violence and protest events" in various regions around the world, including the Middle East (ACLED n.d.).

[3] ACCORD advises using "extreme caution when using fatality numbers" as fatality data is "vulnerable to bias and inaccurate reporting," and that the ACLED uses the "most conservative estimate available" based on "publicly available, secondary reports" (Austrian Red Cross 23 June 2020a, 3).

[4] Iraq Body Count (IBC) is an "independent open-ended project" started in 2003; it aims for a "full accounting of civilian deaths in Iraq, based on open-source information" (EU and IBC Feb. 2019, 7).

[5] Sources indicate that the Peshmerga is the military force of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (Australia 17 Aug. 2020, para. 5.17; US 24 Feb. 2020).

[6] The Middle East Research Institute (MERI) is an Erbil-based not-for-profit organization that studies policy issues "relating to the people, the land and the system of governance," particularly in Kurdistan and Iraq (MERI n.d.).

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